**Gut Punched**

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Your son asks for a dress.

It’s an hour before daycare. He is wearing a diaper, tossing his dresser. He is two-years old.

“A dress?” you say.

“Yes.” He wants to twirl and have the skirt donut out from him. “Like *Elsa*.”

You step back. No, you think. Little boys don’t wear dresses.

But you don’t say that because you’re an English professor, well-trained in the language of acceptance. You’ve known crossdressers. You’re friends with a diverse group of LGBTQ+ people. You’re not homophobic or transphobic. Or at least you didn’t think so. You also know crossdressing doesn’t necessarily say anything about one’s sexuality and even if it did, you wouldn’t care because you’re fucking cool like that.

So why are you anxious? Irritable? Just wanting to him to stop?

Is it a prejudice you’ve repressed into your middle age? A hidden bigotry awaiting its birth on the occasion of your 40th birthday like the loss of hair?

“Daddy, I want a dress.”

You’re mind tumbles, fearing you’re imposing a traditional masculine ethos upon your toddler, the kind that leads to lifelong bouts of depression masked by alcoholism. Like all the men you grew up with.

After all, you call him “little man” and “big boy.” You tell him he’s “handsome.” You keep his hair short.

“Daddy, do I have a dress?”

You don’t have a dress, so you put him in the soccer jersey you bought him in Ireland and send him to daycare.

But this conversation is on your mind for days. You promised yourself you wouldn’t be that kind of dad. The kind that *forces* your son into your image.

But here you are. What now?

You tell your wife.

She is surprised. “Really?” she says. “You?”

You don’t know what’s wrong, you try to explain.

Okay. She says she’ll buy some dresses for him.

You nod, say “sure.”

But you’re scared and drawn back to your childhood during the 80s and 90s, back to the days when boys didn’t wear dresses. You certainly didn’t.

But why didn’t they? Why didn’t you?

Because you’d get beaten. Badly. Because you grew up in a different universe than the liberal, *mostly* accepting college town where you live now.

You were raised in a world defined by low grade violence, punctuated by high grade violence. You’ve seen a man hit with a pipe. You’ve witnessed knives flourished. You’ve heard gunshots, close enough that you’ve ducked and been correct to duck.

You’ve gotten gut punched. Face punched. There were no suspensions in those days. Rub some dirt on it. Suck it up. Be a man. Hence, you startle easily, throw your fists up at surprise. Have nightmares.

You’ve been called “fag” so many times you can’t remember the first occasion, though you remember the last time came from a pair of good old boys in a Target parking lot who saw you strolling your son and they called out to you as they sped off, but you know it wasn’t about your sexuality—it was about you being the type of man who strolls his son.

You know there are men in the world, men you’ve met, the fathers of boys you grew up with, who taught their boys to see a boy in a dress, a boy like your son, and beat him until he bleeds.

You imagine punches cracking skulls, brains slipping out and hence you’re scared that if your son wears a dress, his brains too will slip out of his cracked skull because the boys and men you knew from the 80’s and 90’s—the boys and men who left you frightened and angry and prone to drink—will beat the brains out of your son.

So, you close down when your two-year old wants to twirl like a character from *Frozen.* Like a coward.

After days of thinking about this, you resolve to be brave, not because you aren’t scared for him—because you wake up every day, look out at the world, and are scared for him—but because you’re more frightened to fuck up your kid the way you were fucked up before him.

A week later, your son puts on his Irish soccer jersey and notices it’s big on him and he spins and calls it ‘his dress.’

“It’s pretty,” he says.

“It is pretty,” you tell him. *Say it again.*

It is very pretty.